INTEROPERABILITY

What Does the 'O' in OSF Really Stand For?

This may sound paradoxical, but being a good citizen of the network means being willing to argue on technical grounds. Take dynamic routing protocols, for example. The TCP camp developed the Open Shortest Path First protocol. The Open Systems Interconnection world has the Intermediate System to Intermediate System protocol. Both groups readily admit they learned much from each other, thereby improving the quality of both TCP and OSI networks.

Or, take network management. The Simple Network Management Protocol, Common Management Information Protocol and CMIP Over TCP were all competing approaches. Although most production work ultimately migrated over to SNMP, we all learned a lot about network management from the open debates.

If you believe what you have is good, you must be willing to lay it on the table for all to see. Marketing propaganda, non-disclosure statements and other elitist policies hurt the users, the vendors, and ultimately, all of us.

Take the Open Software Foundation. I'm a big fan of lots of the OSF components. I think the name service, provided by Digital Equipment Corp., is the best in the business. Other OSF adoptions, such as the operating system interfaces or the Andrew File System, also have much to offer.

Yet, it's impossible to get decent information about OSF unless you're a member of their club. When I asked for information, all I got was marketing hype.

When I wrote a book looking at OSF, Open Network Computing, OSI and other open solutions, I sent dozens of courtesy copies of the manuscript out for technical review. Everybody responded with great feedback.

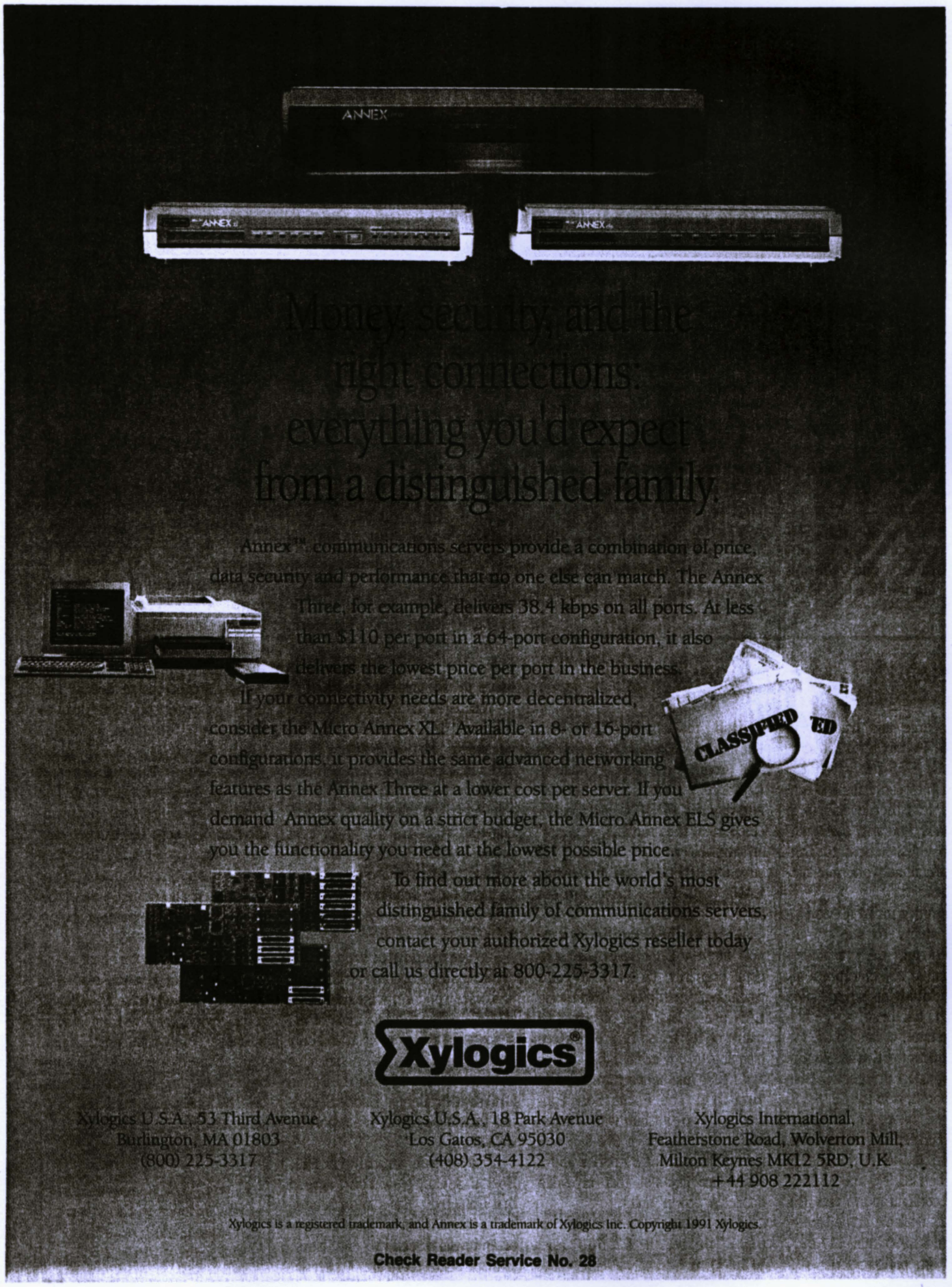
Everybody but OSF, that is. They had their general counsel send me a nasty letter. OSF could not comment on the work of outside parties. OSF was returning all copies of my manuscript. I was not to claim that OSF had endorsed my work.

It takes very little to be a good citizen in the engineering community. For starters, though, you have to have enough confidence in what you're doing to defend your views. Snide remarks and marketing hype don't cut it.

The idea behind OSF is a good one. We can't have an open network, however, unless we know how the pieces work. Users have long passed the point where they are willing to trust in some vendor-supplied guru to do the right thing. We want to see the dirty details laid out on the table.

So who ended up doing the technical review of the OSF part of my book? Engineers at Sun Microsystems Inc., Mountain View, Calif., were kind enough to help me correct some technical errors. Kind of ironic when you consider that OSF was formed expressly to stop Sun. The difference in attitude is why Sun is successful and OSF is not.

CARL MALAMUD'S next book is Exploring the Internet: A Technical Travelogue, *which will be published by Prentice Hall and will be featured at Interop '92 Fall. The opinions expressed here are his own.*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